

Sun Tzu and Kautilya on War and Statecraft : Their Relevance Today

Lieutenant Colonel BS Varma (Retd)@

Historical Perspective

Written in 500 BC, Sun Tzu's essays on 'The Art of War' are still relevant today because they are 'the concentrated essence of wisdom on the conduct of war'. Among all the military thinkers of the past, only Clausewitz is comparable and he is even more 'dated' than Sun Tzu. Sun Tzu has clearer vision, more profound insight and eternal freshness.¹

In the past, successive generations of Chinese and Japanese soldiers and scholars evolved their military thinking based on Sun Tzu's 'Seven Military Classics'. Much later in the eighteenth century, the European colonial powers and Russia evinced interest in Sun Tzu leading to many translations of his works. In 1772, 'The Art of War' was published in Paris and was possibly read by Napoleon, as a young officer. In 1803, he said "China is a sleeping giant, when she awakes the whole world will tremble". Later, in 20th Century, Mao Zedong keeping the "sleeping giant" in mind, promised his Communist comrades "All that the West has, China will have". Today China, aided by their cumulative civilisational military wisdom, has awakened and shaken the world to emerge as a leading world power. Mao Zedong in his two celebrated essays, "On Protracted War" (1936) and "The Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War" (1936) acknowledged his indebtedness to Sun Tzu.²

Recently on 25 Jul 2014, speaking at a book release function at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "India very often is not a history conscious nation.....only a society which is conscious of history has the potential to create."³ In this context, India with its rich civilisational and martial heritage must learn from what military strategists like Sun Tzu, Kautilya, Clausewitz, Liddell Hart and Samuel Griffith said on the 'conduct of war'. It is equally important to study Military History to learn the lessons from other's experiences because human life span is too short to gain experience in every field. In the Indian context, it will be relevant to quote Major General PJS Sandhu (Retd) from his article in USI Journal Oct-Dec 2011.⁴

"If the military and civilian leaders of those times had studied the Korean War (1950-53) and imbibed its lessons, the outcome might have been different. It will be generations before we come to terms with what happened in October-November 1962."

In Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' situations visualised some 2300 years ago remain astonishingly relevant to date. It is so, despite the European industrial revolution and ever continuing march of science and technology besides the present day revolutions in military affairs.⁵

A few selected quotes on what Sun Tzu and Kautilya said on 'war and statecraft' and responsibilities of the heads of the State (Kings), military leaders (Generals) and the polity are put together in the succeeding paragraphs to provide a glimpse of oriental military wisdom to 'kindle interest' in statecraft and matters military. Certainly, being strong intellectually and militarily have been the two essential civilisational characteristics.

Sun Tzu's Precepts on War

Study of War

War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the promise of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be studied thoroughly. Moral strength and intellectual faculty were decisive in war whose proper application could lead to certain success.⁶

Seeking Supreme Excellence in War

To fight and win in all battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's will and resistance without fighting.⁷

Planning and Readiness

The art of war teaches us to rely not on the likelihood of the enemy's not coming, but on our own readiness to receive him; not on the chance of his not attacking, but rather on the fact that we have made our plans unassailable.⁸

Surprise and Deception

All warfare is based on deception. Deception means deceiving or being deceived, tricking or shamming by doing the unexpected to achieve surprise. It involves use of military devices leading to victory which must not be divulged beforehand.⁹

Waging War

The art of war is governed by five constant factors : The Moral Law; Heaven (signifying night and day, cold and heat, times and seasons); Earth (comprising distances, danger and security, open ground and narrow passes, the chances of life and death; The Commander (should stand for the virtues of wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage and strictness); Method and Discipline. Every general should be familiar with these five heads to be victorious.¹⁰

On Long Wars

There is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare. In war, let your object be victory and not lengthy campaigns.¹¹

Five Essentials for Victory

He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight; he will win who knows how to handle both superior and inferior forces; he will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks; he will win, who prepared himself, waits to take the enemy unprepared; he will win who has military capacity and is not interfered with by the sovereign. Hence, if you know the enemy and know yourself you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer losses (e.g. heavy casualties in the Kargil War). If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle (e.g. 1962 War).¹²

Methods of Attack

In battle, there are not more than two methods of attack; the direct and indirect; yet these two in combination, the direct and the indirect, lead on to each other. It is like moving in a circle – you never come to an end.¹³

On Generalship

In war, the General receives his command from the sovereign, collects his army and concentrates his forces. He, whose generals are able and not interfered with by the sovereign will be victorious. (To make appointments is the province of the sovereign; to decide on battle, that of the general. A sovereign of high character and intelligence must be able to know the right man, should place the responsibility on him and expect results).¹⁴

The general who advances without coveting fame and retreats without fearing disgrace, whose only thought is to protect his country and so service for his sovereign, is the jewel of the kingdom.¹⁵

On Gaining Victory

If you know the enemy, know yourself; your victory will never be endangered. Know the ground, know the weather; your victory will then be total.”¹⁶

Kautilya on Statecraft

Relevance for India

Kautilya, also called Chanakya, is as big a military thinker as Sun Tzu; as also, an outstanding military thinker who inspired Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel amongst others to follow his teachings at the time of our Independence. Field Marshal KM Cariappa, as Commander-in Chief of the Indian Army, had the privilege of observing how closely the Sardar followed Kautilya in precept and practice. Kautilya always had much to offer to the Nation and its strategists.¹⁷ Free India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru studied Kautilya and highlighted the achievements of Chandragupta and Chanakya in establishing Mauryan Empire within two years of Alexander's death in his book, 'Discovery of India' – crediting Chanakya with playing a dominating part in further growth and preservation of the empire.

Duties and Responsibilities

Kautilya's Arthashastra dwells on the Mauryan Army and has in many places sought to advise the Rajadhiraj (King) on the duties and responsibilities of the Head of State. It is amazing how clearly he saw the likely faultlines in governance, the intricacies of management of the military by the State functionaries, the nature of the military and the citizenry and the close interplay between them all which are so completely relevant even after 2000 years.¹⁸

Importance and Usage

Most of the Arthasastra's contents were distilled from the four Vedas – Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda and Puranas, including Ramayana and Mahabharata.¹⁹ Therefore, Arthsastra's maxims over the millennia have become part of everyday life through folklore. For instance, the four stratagems of Saam (conciliation or treaty), Daam (reward or money) Dand (retribution) and Bhed (secrecy of plans, creating dissensions and gaining intelligence) continue to be amongst the best used dictums. It reinforces two fundamentals : “one who aspires for peace should prepare for war ; and without good administration, there cannot be good governance and rule.”²⁰

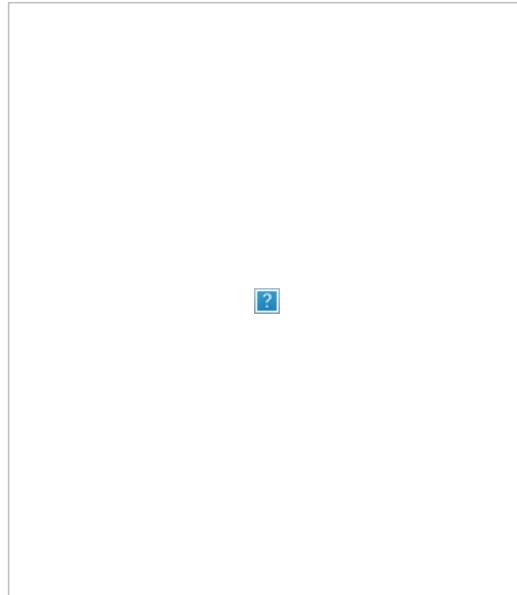
Contents

The Arthsastra contains fifteen Adhikarnas (books) in which broadly speaking : The first five deal with internal administration of the State, the following eight cover its relations with neighbours, while the concluding two are on miscellaneous subjects. Importantly, Book Six (two chapters); firstly, amplifies the constituents of the Nation State (king, ministers, treasury, the army, fortifications and alliances) and the qualities require in the king and his advisors for ensuring effective governance; secondly, it explains the types of neighbours and the 'Circle of States' (Mandala Theory) in various forms of alliances and conflict. Book Nine (seven chapters) and Book Ten (six chapters) are related to 'The Activity of the King about to March' and 'Concerning War' respectively.²¹

Analytical Study

An analytical study of the Arthasastra suggests that Chandragupta and Kautilya had made an extensive study of the causes and consequences of the fall of the Nanda dynasty, and also the failure of Porus at Jhelum. [Refer to Schematic Sketch of Battle of Jhelum (326 BC) in USI Journal, Oct-Dec 2012, p. 56]. Accordingly, he introduced improvements in the Mauryan Army; in matters of tactics, defence, the security of the sovereign and commanders, considerations for crossing of water obstacles, movement through deserts, forests and mountains, the formations for attack and defence – and even withdrawal. The tactical wisdom on indispensability of 'reserves' was also highlighted: “Having gone a distance of 200 bows, the King should take his position together with reserves; without reserves, he should never attack”.²² No wonder he established the Maurya Empire which extended to the North along the natural boundaries of the Himalayas, to the East into Assam, to the West beyond modern Pakistan, into Balochistan and the Hindu Kush mountains of what is now Afghanistan.²³

(Refer to Map)



Map: Maurya Empire at its maximum extent
Source : http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurya_empire)

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the 20th century, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* have evoked much interest in India and abroad. Sun Tzu was a thinking military general (who knew the multi-faceted compulsions of a State) while Kautilya was an all pervasive strategist of statecraft (who also knew the components and compulsions of war). Sun Tzu and Kautilya's works are outstanding classics that deal with the issues of war and peace in both strategic and practical terms. In China, generals and military thinkers made strategic studies into an independent discipline and sustained it down the centuries.²⁴

On the other hand, Kautilyan strategic culture lost its vigour with the decline of Hindu India. Subsequent Indian rulers - Muslims and Mughals - developed their own strategic thought. Later, during the British imperial rule, their war strategy in India encouraged treason and forgery, intrigue and forgery, reinforced by bribery and blackmail, leading to complete subjugation of the Indian people and suppression of the strategic thinking process.²⁵ By using Indian resources, wealth, soldiers and manpower they went on to create 'The British Indian Empire' whose strategic frontiers lay well beyond the Maurya Empire.²⁶

Lastly, even after the 1962 border conflict with China, a study of China's strategic culture was not taken up by either the military or the academics. It is only over the last two decades or so that some modest beginnings have been made to examine the issue of military strategy and national security across the Country. It may be worthwhile to expose our future military leaders to these classics on warfare and statecraft right from their impressionable years at the National Defence Academy and carry these right through the military and civil institutions of higher learning. As one grows up in age and service these texts begin to take on different meanings and are intellectually stimulating.

Endnotes

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3. Times of India, 26 Jul 2014, p 17.
4. Major General PJS Sandhu (Retd), 'Battle of Se-La and Bomdi-La : A View from the Other Side of the Hill' and a Comparison with the Battle of Chosin Reservoir', USI Journal Oct-Dec 2011, pp 575-594.
5. Brigadier Chandra B Khanduri (Retd), 'Kautilya's Arthashastra : The Wonder It Was and the Wonder It Remains', USI Journal, Oct-Dec 2012, pp 555-564.
6. Op. Cit. Endnote 1, p 63.
7. Lionel Giles, 'The Art of War by Sun Tzu' translation originally published in 1910.
8. In 1944, Lionel Giles translation was included by TR Phillips in 'Roots of Strategy' (Harrisburg, PA : The Military Service Publishing Company, 1953).
9. Op. Cit. Endnote 7, p 4-5
10. Op. Cit. Endnote 7, p 3-4.

11. Op. Cit. Endnote 7, p 6-8.
12. Op. Cit. Endnote 7 p11
13. Op. Cit. Endnote 7, p 16
14. Op. Cit. Endnote 1, p 83.
15. Op. Cit. Endnote 7, p 35.
16. Op. Cit. Endnote 7, p. 36
17. Field Marshal KM Cariappa in Foreword to the book 'Generals and Strategists : From Kautilya to Thimayya' by Chandra B Khanduri, 09 Mar 1991.
18. Air Marshal SG Inamdar, PVSM, VSM (Retd) 'Kautilya to Chandragupta on the Mauryan Soldier', USI Journal, Jan-Mar 2010, pp 105-109.
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22. Op. Cit., 5, p. 561.
23. Downloaded from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia on 31 Jul 2014.
24. KN Ramachandran, in Introduction of the book, 'Sun Zi and China's Strategic Culture', IDSA, New Delhi, Sep 1999.
25. Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Discovery of India', Signet Press, Calcutta, 1946, pp 73, 85, 90, 96, 97, 99, 111 and 128. Also refer to the pages 122-125, under the heading 'Chandragupta and Chanakya : The Maurya Empire established' in the 1981 Edition published by Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund with Foreword by Indira Gandhi, dated 04 November 1980.
26. Rear Admiral K Raja Menon's National Security Paper 2011, 'Components of National Security and Synergising them for Envisaged Security Threats' USI Journal, Jan-Mar 2012, pp 105-143.

@Lieutenant Colonel BS Varma (Retd) was commissioned into 18 Cavalry on 11 Jun 1967 and was later transferred to 43 Armoured Regiment in February 1981, on its raising. He retired from the Army on 30 Jun 2004. Presently, he is working as Assistant Director at USI since Jun 2007.

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